

THE GOOD BOOK

PART VI: CORE PRINCIPLES

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Palm Sunday, March 25, 2018

Lectionary Reading: Matthew 21: 1-13.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Starting with Rousseau in

Heaven with His Confessions; Ending with Core Principles

This is Part VI of the series, looking at different aspects of the Bible. We did Bible 101, sort of an overview in Part I. Then came a sermon on Use and Abuse of the Bible in Part II, the Bible and Women in Part III, the Bible and Homosexuality in Part IV, and the Bible and Money in Part V. Today I shall attempt the penultimate sermon in the series, Core Principles in the Bible, and the final sermon in the series will appear on Easter Sunday, Part VII, Fields and Meadows.

I'd like to start off today with comparing two brilliant men. One is from the 18th Century; the other is from the 20th Century. In my comparison, I need to forewarn you that I will be using one inappropriate word. You will see later why I'm making this exception.

The first of the two brilliant men is Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In his final work, which he called *Confessions*, he imagines himself having "died and gone to heaven." But here is how this great and brilliant philosopher imagines the event: He approaches the heavenly gates with head held high, no bowing, no praise of God, no hint of fear. He has with him, of course, a copy of his *Confessions*, and as he enters through the pearly gates, all heaven turns toward him, setting aside their eternal praise of God to listen to Rousseau and hear his story.

Rousseau begins to speak to the heavenly host, with their attention no longer on God but on him. "I have bared my secret soul as Thou thyself has seen it, Eternal Being! So let the numberless legion of my fellow men gather around me, and hear my confessions." He does mention them and what follows is what he calls his depravities, probably referring to any number of illegiti-

mate children, all of whom he deserted. “But let each of them reveal his heart at the foot of Thy throne with equal sincerity, and may any man who dares, say, ‘I was a better man than he.’”

Okay, so let us assume that good old Jean-Jacques Rousseau was an ego-secure fellow, having declared before the throne of God that no one who has ever lived was a better man than he.

Another Brilliant Person Is

J.C. Becker in the Classroom with His Specialty, Apostle Paul

Now let us compare Rousseau with another brilliant person. Here I will choose the most intimidating professor I ever had. I mentioned him a few weeks back in another context. His name is Johan Christian Becker, a professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary.

I was recently reading an editorial by Michael Lindvall, pastor of Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, and in it he described Becker, bringing back a flood of memories for me, and not only pleasant ones. Here is his description, which is much better than I could ever do:

Johan Christian Becker “. . . was a riveting classroom lecturer, especially when the subject was the Apostle Paul. Paul was his specialty, and Becker had famously passionate convictions about the apostle. By the end of a lecture, Becker would have often ascended to a paroxysm of academic passion. He paced the dais in his classroom, his Dutch accent thickening as he became increasingly animated by some question of Pauline scholarship. He was convinced of his convictions and often rhetorically lacerated scholars who stubbornly held to what Becker considered patently absurd notions. He waved his arms and jabbed his index finger this way and that; his voice rose; his face reddened.”

(He never paid attention to the time, so every lecture would only begin to be concluded with the sound of the bell.) “The sound of the bell drew Becker back to earth, and he would look out at the class and say in an even voice, ‘Then again, this may be all bullshit.’” One scholar, Becker, knows full well that our grasp of truth, our deepest understandings, are all provisional. Our declaration of the truth should always be spelled with a small t. The other scholar, Rousseau, arrogantly throws down the gauntlet even in the presence of saints, angels, and God Himself.

My Question: What

Are the Core Principles Found in the Bible?

Core principles are the subject of the penultimate in this series of sermons throughout the season of Lent. What are the Core Principles of the Bible? Of our faith? That is a hard question, a good question.

If one were to google “What are the Core Principles of the Bible?” you would have enough manure for your garden for the rest of your lives. If every one of you were to take that question as an assignment, and come back next Sunday on Easter with a list of what you think are the Core Principles, we would have that many different answers. There would be commonalities, of course, but every answer would be different, and some of us would be well-assured, in a Rousseau-like fashion, that our answer is the correct one, and others among us might be thinking that our answer is that much more manure.

I’m going to take a stab at it, and I’m somewhere in the middle. I hardly have the confidence to throw my list at the feet of God, and to say, “There, hope you’re happy.” Nor do I think it is BS. Rather, I offer it to you to spur your own thinking — thinking with your head and with your heart.

I’m going to offer you four Core Principles of the Bible, not that I’m trying to keep it simple, but rather that I think it actually is simple:

- 1. We should have faith in the presence of God.** It’s right there in our Statement of Oneness on purpose: God “in whom we live and move and have our being,” and Jesus telling us that the kingdom of heaven is within us. It is a Core Principle that God is present, both throughout the world and within us. It can also be stated negatively: We are never, never, never forsaken by God. This belief, this faith, this principle engenders many positive attributes that our world needs. I will mention two:
 - a. Faith engenders hope.** If God is present, then any situation, however dark, however despairing, is laced with hope. I’ve been thinking about that because I was asked to be on a panel this coming Wednesday night in Vestal Central High School to address the notion of how we can prevent teen suicide.

What I've been thinking about is how people, not just teenagers, not just military personnel, but people generally, sometimes despairingly feel that, if they can't think of a solution to their problems, then a solution doesn't exist. If they can't think of a way out of their terrible circumstances, then a way out doesn't exist.

With God, however, we read that all things are possible. This is one of the most unbelievably passages in the Bible. With God, all things are possible, even if it seems impossible, outlandish, depressingly ridiculous. The presence of God engenders hope, even in the blackest darkness.

- b. Faith engenders grace.** I remember one time when I got pulled over. I was speeding up near Ithaca, and I got pulled over by a policeman. He comes up to the window. You roll the window down, and the officer requests your license and registration. You fumble around in the glove compartment until you find it. I hand them to the policeman. He turns and starts to walk back, and in that moment I stick my head out the window and say, "Please remember to temper justice with mercy." Immediately I'm thinking, "Why did you word it that way? What a nerd!" But that's what I said. And he comes back with a warning and not a ticket. He tempered justice with mercy.

Now imagine that scene writ large — business relationships, schoolyard relationships, marital relationships, international relationships — all handled with grace, the giving of ourselves more than the law demands, more than might be required of us, more than might be deserved by another person. It need not be at the expense of law, but our world, our culture, our nation states, are thin on mercy, in need of grace, engendered by the presence of God.

- 2. Justice is one of the main themes of the Bible. Indeed of all religions.** Imagine for a moment a pack of zebras running by, and it's the last one, the one with a limp, or not as fast as the others, that is the one picked off by the lions. It's nature. It's ultimately good for both the lions as they get fed and it's actually good for the zebras, who may have a genetically inferior specimen removed from the gene pool. It's the way the world is.

But Jesus says that is not so among humans. Look out for the widow and the orphan; wash the feet of your brother or sister; give to the one who asks for both

your coat and your cloak; feed the poor. “Whenever you have done it to the least of these, you have done it to me.” But what if the poor person doesn’t even try? What if they are completely unemployable and therefore parasitic upon the state? So which will it be — Darwinian capitalism or a Socialist welfare state? Truth, predictably, is found somewhere in the middle.

What grieves me deeply is that — in this great country of ours, the richest the world has ever seen — we still delude ourselves about justice. We tell ourselves that what we have, we have because we have earned it. We are smart and educated, and we have worked hard and earned and saved. We tell ourselves that the poor are that way because of being lazy or stupid, or both. We are loathe to address the underlying truths of such things as white privilege, and as well the generational consequences of slavery, followed by Jim Crow, followed by institutional racism.

I believe that the way to justice lies in one of our theological beliefs. When we see people, what is it, deeply, that we see? If we see bodies, we also see dozens of differences between us, race, gender, age. But what if when we look at another person and we see a soul, a soul experiencing a given incarnation? When we see a soul, we see a kindred soul, a brother or sister, a fellow image of God not distracted by the inconsequential material manifestation. Maybe this is all just BS. But I don’t want to live in a society where survival of the fittest is the final word.

- 3. Inclusion. Jesus diagnosed the root illness of humanity as a feeling that we are separate.** That root illness is the feeling (not true whatsoever, but people believing it anyway) that we are separate from God, that a gulf exists between us and God because God is righteous and we are sinful. It is also believing that we are separate from one another, and using every conceivable type of distinction to prop up the walls between us. Additionally, we also believe that we are separate from creation, that there is the world and there is us in it, conquering it.

If ever there was a theme to Jesus’ words and actions, it was breaking down walls. Through forgiveness, through mercy and grace, through reconciliation, breaking down any barrier between us and God, between us and our fellow men and women, between us and our world, nature, our home. This theme, this Core Principle, is the path not only to justice, but also to shalom or peace.

- 4. Look for a moment at this Palm Sunday as an act of love.** Jesus knew that when he entered the city, it would be for the last time. He predicted his death in Jerusalem three times, as recounted in the gospels, before he enters the gates on that fateful day. Why did he do it anyway? Why would he do that?

Let me suggest this as a reason and as a Core Principle of the Bible: He loves you. He loves you and is willing to die for you. He said one time that the purpose of his incarnation was simple: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” And the way to have abundant life is by his teachings about the presence of God, about living justly in the world, and of practicing inclusion. And he wasn’t going to back down on those teachings. No, if you genuinely love, you are willing to go to the end of the road for them.

Core Principles of the Bible

Are the Presence of God, and Justice, Inclusion, and Love

These are the Core Principles of the Bible that I would offer you for your contemplation: Presence, justice, inclusion, and love. Today is Palm Sunday, and next Sunday is Easter. One of my favorite Easter texts comes from the very end of the gospel of John where Mary Magdalene sees the risen Christ, but somehow doesn’t recognize him. And the text says that Mary, supposing him to be the gardener, asks about the open tomb and where they might have taken Jesus’ body.

He then says her name, and immediately she recognizes him. I would like to suggest that he is indeed the gardener. And through the constellation of his teachings, including presence, justice, inclusion, and love, Eden is restored.

Amen.